

IN MORAL DANGER – OUTLINE

In Moral Danger is a 5 x 55-minute TV series based on Biggs' best-selling autobiography *In Moral Danger*. The series centres on protagonist Alice, a girl born into a fractured family with levels of abuse and neglect that beggar the imagination. Yet within the family there are reservoirs of resilience and love, between Alice and her sisters in particular, that outshines, at least temporarily, the darkness threatening to destroy them. But when traded off to a sexual predator, an educated and wealthy criminal barrister, young Alice is left on her own, and what happens to her in the following nine months resonates through the next thirty years of her life.

Sometimes she's consciously aware of those resonances, sometimes not. In the dysfunctional mess of her family, tragedy is never far away, just like poverty and encounters with the law. No-one's going to save Alice. She'll either make it out, or die in the attempt.

She makes it out. Finds resources in herself, learns how to survive, how to educate herself in whatever she needs, how to get money, how to hold down a job and be a good friend. Eventually, after many wrong turns, Alice learns how to find and sustain healthy relationships with people who actually care for her.

Alice's life chances may have been slim, even if the way she lived her life and made it out is anything but. She shouldn't have made it out alive – most of her brothers and sisters didn't – but she was exceptional, extraordinary even, and that's why she's at the centre of this tv series, a lead character to die for, *The Girl Who Lived*.

Episode One

Alice is 17, sitting in the waiting room of a psychiatric hospital. She's been waiting a long time and no-one has seen her. So she goes berserk, throwing chairs at the wall, screaming. That gets her attention and within an hour she's admitted. Success.

Next day she meets Dr Hammersmith, who Alice thinks looks cool. She's confident, smart, unphased by Alice, if anything slightly amused by her. She tells Dr H *terrible* things have happened to her, *terrible*. But she's not sure the Dr believes her.

She does after Ma comes barrelling into the hospital the next day, all 200kg of her, telling Alice she wants her out of this place, she doesn't belong in a looney bin, ignoring Alice saying she's going nowhere, thanks.

That doesn't mean Alice's going to say what happened though, why should she? If H is as smart as Alice wants her to be she'll get it out of her somehow. But she doesn't. She

just sits and waits for Alice to open up. And so the game begins. Walk in, sit down, say nothing. Dr H sits watches, says nothing. An hour passes. Next please! Day after day, a game of psychiatric chicken. It would be different if the doctor got mad, or impatient, but Alice knows she's up against an expert.

Outside the silent meetings, Alice finds a way to pass the time: she finds a recorder and some sheet music and starts teaching herself the recorder. She likes playing, and does so ten hours a day until patients and staff promise murder unless she takes it outside. So that's how she spends her time, sitting outside playing recorder interspersed with silent hours in the company of Dr Do Nothing.

Alice doesn't know the doctor has done at least one thing. She walked carefully up to a tree while Alice played her recorder and listened. So their next meeting starts with Dr H telling Alice her playing had promise. Alice is still bathing in her praise when she realises she's started talking about her life.

She remembers being very young and the family packing their belongings on the street pavement, running from the rent man. She's there on that street, seeing herself as a child. Dr H is there too, the two of them on that childhood street, talking as the remembered family fusses around them. She points out her sisters, and the man who thought he was their father but wasn't, the same man that later slept with her oldest sister when she was a little girl and was never seen again. The man they're talking about disappears in front of their eyes as Alice describes his fate.

Out in the hospital gardens Alice meets Max, older than her, skinny, but he makes her laugh. He takes her to a room at the top of the stairs to have sex with her. Alice explains that if someone asked you for a glass of water you wouldn't say no would you? She tells this to Dr H as the two of them lean on the wall watching Alice give Max what he wants. Dr H asks Alice whether she enjoyed it but she already knows the answer because as soon as it's over Alice goes to an empty stairwell and screams so fiercely that when the nurses come to find her they're scared to get too close. But they give Alice what she wanted, another sleeping pill to add to her secret stash.

Killing yourself is not such a big deal after all. Ma came to Alice's school when she was younger to say goodbye because Ma had decided to kill herself. Alice watched Ma leave not knowing if she'd see her again. But she did, and part of Alice always thought she would.

But what about the other part that didn't? That was what Dr H asked when Alice told her about Ma. The part that was scared and lonely, what about that part?

Maybe that triggered Alice's decision to take her sleeping pill stash the next afternoon down by the stream in the hospital gardens. But like Ma, she's found in time, and as her stomach is pumped, she remembers being taken to a strange house as a 14-year-old girl, being led inside by a well-dressed man, and being told, welcome to your new home.

And that, says Dr H, as Alice rests her head on the chair in the doctor's office, is what we are here for. So let's start.

Episode Two

Alice is in her early twenties now and starting work as a tram conductress in Melbourne. She meets Bob, a bully who just doesn't like intelligent women. So straight away there's a problem. He's the union rep and he wants her union application form signed. Alice says she wants to read it first. Over the next few days he hassles her rudely for the form. The more he does it, the less she wants to give it to him. When she learns it's possible to apply for an exemption certificate from union membership she applies and gets one, not realising she's only the second person in Australia to get one after a new law was passed. She slaps her exemption certificate on Vern's desk.

A strike is called at the depot, which is picketed and Alice is called a scab. She retreats to a café the first morning this happens to her. Someone sits at the back watching her, saying nothing, Dr H.

The strike and Alice's stand is big news. TV crews film the depot, journalists talk to Alice, no-one notices that she's objecting to being bullied by an unpleasant man.

But Alice's not going through this alone. Watching TV news with her at home is Dr H, by now a regular presence in her life, coming and going at will, asking pointed questions, being reassuring, making Alice smile when things threaten to get too serious. Alice knows Dr H doesn't really exist, but at the same time she likes having her around. She tells Dr H she knows she's not real but Dr H pays no attention.

At night, when Alice stops thinking about the strike and falls asleep, she remembers that big comfortable house, and the man who took her there, Vernon. How she wanted to please him, how she tried to cook dinner for him and messed it up, how he stood behind his desk and shouted at her, like Bob did.

But Vernon was kinder, apologised, said he needed her help, and valued her. He sent her to bed and later that night her door opened and someone stood over her, looking down at her in bed. She remembers it again and opens her eyes. Hello, says Dr H. Only me.

The strike is worsening. Alice is recognised and sworn at on the street. Gets death threats. The first person who got the exemption certificate in Sydney was murdered. The tram company meets and offers her a different job. Again no-one considers why this young woman is taking such a stand. Often, off to one side, Alice sees Dr H watching her, saying nothing, waiting for Alice to understand.

Alice agrees to a serious tv interview to tell her side of the strike story. Dr H sits in the taxi with her on the way to the TV station, telling her to be careful.

And Dr H is right, because though Alice meets the tram company before the interview and she accepts their job offer to end the strike, that's not what the interviewer's after. They have their exclusive that the strike is over, but what they really want to talk to Alice about is her past. Is it true that I was in a mental hospital? Is it true she once worked as a prostitute in Japan? Is it true you're a communist... is it true that... that..?

Alice looks at the interviewer. It's Dr H. She looks behind the cameras and there's Dr H again, arms folded with a look that says you got yourself into this...now get yourself out. And Alice does, deflecting the questions elegantly.

The next day, for the first time in weeks, Alice can relax. She goes to the park, sits on a bench in the sun. And that's when two girls run up to her. Is that really you Mummy Alice? Alice recognises them right away, Vernon's daughters. Come and visit they say, Dad will be so excited to see you! Alice doesn't know what to say. Dr H, sitting at the other end of her bench, winks at her. *Nothing's over Alice, it's only just getting started.*

Episode Three

Alice is seven, home alone with Ma. A lovely slow day for a girl who never has her mother to herself. She falls asleep next to Ma. When she wakes she's twelve years older and shoplifting in a department store with her sister Pommy. Pommy, with the sixth sense for store detectives, so they make it out of the store laughing and running. And run back to Pommy's place, and her addict boyfriend where Alice wonders what Pommy is doing with a man so beneath her. And then she realises. Where's Ma?

Ma is in her car on the way to Brisbane, flying over a cliff after falling asleep. landing the car upside down with Ma unconscious at the wheel with broken ribs and leg. Alice's nagging worry continues at Uni the next day where she meets her new friends including Fabian, who makes a pass at her that Alice stops in its tracks by telling Fabian she's celibate.

Round the corner Dr H is waiting, wanting to know how long this celibacy thing has been going on, and why. She's read The Dice Man and the dice told her to do it. But also, she has friends, a place to live, and is studying. Almost like you're a normal person says Dr H. Meanwhile Ma is still upside down, awake, looking for something to drink, finding a small bottle of water, and fainting again. She's been upside down for 14 hours. Alice calls Pommy, who says not to worry. Alice sits in the dark with the phone in her hand.

Suddenly she's fourteen with a phone in her hand at Vernon's house with her mother on the line asking her to leave and come home. But Alice won't. Because he needs me Ma. He tells me that. And although Alice knows that as Ma asks there are things Ma is not saying that she wants Alice to understand, Alice still says no. And she has to go because there's knocking at the door except that when she opens it it's twelve years later and it's Fabian with a newspaper article about a woman in hospital who had been stuck upside down in a crashed car for three days.

Driving to see her Ma, Alice sits with her thoughts and Dr H in the passenger seat. Dr H is making Alice nervous, and Alice says she's not going through that stuff again. Dr H doesn't answer. Car headlights blind them both and Alice opens her eyes and she's fourteen and being driven by Vernon to his house for the first time. Being shown into the house, being introduced to his two girls, being told about his wife's stays in a psych hospital.

The house is neat. Alice likes neatness and order. It's her first night there, in clean sheets, a big pillow and she sleeps until the sun wakes her and the phone rings and it's Ma asking her to come home again. Please. In Alice's mind, Vernon is like Fred Astair, so sophisticated, like in the movies she watched as a kid. He sits with her that night, talking to her like a grown woman, telling her about his life, his first great love, doomed because she was working class. Then she's in bed again, the big pillow and light across her face and a figure looking down at her in the night, and it's Dr H and her face is serious, almost frightening.

Downstairs when it's light Alice stands with her hand on the telephone trying to call Pommy, but Vernon stops her, tells her the phone is not a toy and if she wants to call anybody she needs to tell him first, and he will say if she can. And she's back in bed, and it's dark until the door of her room opens and a figure blocks out the light from the hall and Alice closes her eyes.

Back in the car on the way to see Ma, Alice asks Dr H why she didn't help her. Dr H says she didn't know Alice then. Perhaps she should have listened to her mother. And

that's when Alice realises the reason she's driving to see her mother is not because of her crash but because she wants to ask about what happened back then.

What Ma wants when Alice gets there is a bucket of KFC. But even that can't get Ma to talk about those days. Dr H looks on, saying nothing except what did you really expect with her eyebrows. What you need, she tells Alice, you aren't going to get from Ma. Pommy says the same when Alice gets back. Expect nothing from Ma and you won't be disappointed.

Alice seeks out that park bench again, the place she goes to think. Dr H sits with her, saying nothing. And here comes fourteen-year-old Alice, walking past them dressed to the nines the way a child trying to look like an adult does, on the way to meet Vernon at his favourite bar to surprise him. They watch young Alice go. And it's only once she's out of sight that the voices of Vernon's two children, older now, call out to Alice, asking her to come and see their father. Startled, Alice turns to Dr H. But she's gone.

Episode Four

Alice walks along the Thailand/Cambodia border wearing a backpack. She's found by villagers and taken to a Cambodian border post. She's locked in a small room. A panel on the door slides across to reveal Dr H, who asks Alice why she's so far from home.

Seeing Dr H's face, Alice is back on the park bench, with Vernon's daughters, begging her to come home. And Dr H is not there to help now. As she approaches Vernon's house Alice sees her younger self stepping into the house for the first time. And then Vernon's daughters call their father, who sees Alice, recovers immediately and is friendly.

They go into the kitchen. Alice remembers Saturday mornings spent there at breakfast with the girls, Vernon reading the paper at the end of the table, then sending the girls upstairs and standing to lean on the counter. Asking her to look at him.

Alice's memory is interrupted by Vernon asking her to look at him and she finds herself sitting in that same chair. Vernon is showing himself to her like he did all those other times. Do you remember, pet? The same words, the exact same words.

The cell door opens and Alice is released with her passport and put onto a UN convoy heading into Cambodia. The UN staffers who are reluctant to take her are scathing about Alice's ignorance about the ongoing Cambodian war. They drop her in a small town as soon as they can, outside a grimy hotel.

That night in the hotel was frightening. Alice pushes her bed against the door and curls up. She wakes in her bed at Vernon's house. The door opens and Vernon stands silhouetted in the light. He walks over slowly. Alice pretends to sleep. He slides his hand under the covers and touches her, her eyes snap open. He tells her to lie still.

A voice is asking her how come she didn't know what she was doing was dangerous, do you think you can just get away with things by ignoring the risks? Alice is talking to two American mercenary pilots who are staying at her hotel. The pilots take Alice under their wing, take her out along with their Cambodian girlfriends, paying for everything. Alice watches them buying dresses for their local girls.

Vernon buys fourteen-year-old Alice a nurse's uniform, so when he takes her and the girls to his parents' in Sydney she'll look like a professional nanny. He tells her to model it for him. That night he comes to Alice's room, takes her by the hand and leads her to his bedroom.

At night in her hotel Chuck, one of the American pilots, knocks drunkenly on her door. She ignores him, tries to sleep. Wakes to knocking on the door the next morning. The pilots are going to Phnom Penh right now. If she wants to come, jump to it.

Flying to Phnom Penh Alice sees a young Cambodian girl staring at her intently. She remembers Vernon getting ready to go out, his date cancelling and she asking to be his date and the way he laughed. How could she think he would turn up with a little girl on his arm? What does she think people would say? Alice looks at the Cambodian girl, the same age as she was that evening, crimson with shame and embarrassment as Vernon drives away.

In Phnom Penh Alice is isolated in a luxurious villa along with Cambodian girls the pilots amuse themselves with when they are in the city. She watches the girls cook, dress, and play with the Americans late at night. Alice starts to dissociate, isolated. She looks for Dr H but she refuses to come. One night Alice slips out of bed to walk the villa corridors and walks back into her past, onto the landing of Vernon's house in her nightdress, going into his bedroom, sitting watching him sleep, paying no attention to the sleeping figure of his wife on the other side of the bed. And then Vernon wakes.

Vernon hauls Alice downstairs into the kitchen so they can't be overheard. She can't do anything like that again, what is she doing? He's furious, brutal in his words. She puts her face in her hands and starts to cry. There's a voice in her ear. She looks up and she's in her villa bedroom and Chuck is crouched on her bed. Alice screams, freaks out, starts throwing things and shouting. Knocks him to the ground.

Next morning Chuck drops her in the road near the Australian Embassy and drives off without a word. At Vernon's house the next morning Vernon tells her to get her things, she's leaving immediately.

The Australian embassy is closed. Alice thinks she sees Dr H but she's half-obscured by smoke. When Alice squints, Dr H is gone but where she was standing is a flag, the stars and stripes. The American Embassy, her way out of Cambodia. Outside, heading for the airport, Alice sees Dr H and argues with her. Why is she always hanging around? Does she think Alice needs her for some reason? And how come she's been here all these years and nothing has ever got any better?

Okay I'll go, says Dr H. I'll give you some alone time. See you in ten years.

A decade later Alice is a successful newspaper journalist in Melbourne. She's in a bar with her colleagues one evening after work. Alice has grown into herself now, she's well-dressed, superficially in control. She glances at the window. Someone is walking past, looking at her. Alice freezes. Another person walks past. And then another. And they are all Dr H, all looking at Alice with that same quizzical smile.

Episode Five

Alice is in her early thirties, a successful journalist in Melbourne. She's called into her editor's office. A woman Alice featured anonymously in a story, a victim of sexual abuse, is suing the paper. The paper will settle because to defend themselves in court would involve attacking a sexual abuse victim, terrible for the reputation of the newspaper. Alice is angry: she did nothing wrong and this woman is trying to use her work for her own purposes.

Alice goes out for a drink with her workmates to decompress. That's where she sees Dr H again, on the street outside. Alice blinks and things return to normal. Except two days later at work she looks across the office and is frightened by an indistinct black shape, jerking and twirling. She looks again and it's a man struggling to put his coat on.

That night at home in bed with her boyfriend sleeping next to her, Alice wakes to see Dr H sitting at the side of her bed. Dr H tells her not to worry about waking her boyfriend because after all, as Alice keeps telling her, she's not real. Alice tells her to leave. Dr H agrees, but before she goes, she asks Alice when was the last time she saw Vernon?

Alice finds herself on the St Kilda seafront in her night clothes from the previous scene, walking beside Dr H. In front of them the air is shimmering. Dr H knows what it is, it's the boundary to the past, that's where Alice has brought them. That's where Alice is going.

She wants Dr H to go with her but Dr H can't, as she explains, she wasn't with Alice then, Alice had sent her away, remember?

Alice walks through into the past. She's younger, simply dressed, heading for the outdoor pools where Vernon said he would be. Vernon stands in his bathing costume, saying he looks pretty good for an older man. They go somewhere private to talk. Alice starts to tell him that she wants him to know the effect he had on her life. but he interrupts, says she has given his situation no thought, and a person can't spend their whole life blaming other people for the way their life has turned out.

Alice is finding the psychological manipulation Vernon used when she was young still works. He puts his hand on her leg, she takes it away, tells him she is the one in control now. Suddenly the girl on the roof is 14. Vernon never allowed kissing. Caught psychologically between the woman she is and the submissive little girl she was, she kisses him, saying she's the one in control now. She leaves, runs somewhere alone and wipes her mouth relentlessly, her eyes full of tears.

Then she's back on the seafront where she started with Dr H, in her night clothes, trying to understand what happened, where her feelings came from. For a moment there's a flash of despair, the idea she will never get away from him. She looks to Dr H, but one look at the doctor's face tells Alice she has to figure this one out on her own.

Suddenly, she does.

Alice walks into a police station to report a series of sexual assaults on her by a man when she was a little girl. She's interviewed by a policewoman. Told they'll interview Vernon. Alice knows he'll deny everything.

Alice finds a woman lawyer who will help her prosecute Vernon in a civil case. Vernon engages a top barrister to defend him in court. Alice's lawyer finds a barrister experienced enough to match with Vernon's ex-Solicitor-General of Victoria. Her lawyer puts Alice on the hunt for useful witnesses. Can Alice find the doctor who treated her in the psychiatric hospital? Dr H? Alice grins.

But when she tracks down the living Dr H she is nothing like Dr H. Older, dryer, badly dressed. She doesn't remember Alice, who lost her case notes years ago. When Alice comes out of her office she looks around for Dr H, who is nowhere in sight. I'd be too bloody ashamed to show my face too, says Alice to thin air.

The need for a good witness remains. Alice's lawyer points out that Vernon was a John of Ma's: would Ma testify? Alice isn't sure, she and Ma don't see each other much now since Alice got respectable, with a good job, her own house, and honest money.

Alice finds Ma and asks her. Ma puts up a list of reasons why she wouldn't be a good witness but finally admits she fears people in court will think she was a bad mother. Well maybe you were, is Alice's response. Mother and daughter look at each other. Ma nods, she'll do it.

On the day of the case, Alice's lawyer calls as Alice dresses. Their barrister pulled out but they have a replacement. When Alice meets the replacement her doubts rise: he looks like a child, against a top QC? Alice's lawyer pulls her to one side. He'll be fine, he's a pro. Now where's your mother? There's controlled panic until Ma strolls in on the dot of nine.

Going into court Alice sees Vernon, older but not much different. He won't look at her. The case is opened by the female judge. Alice is first up and her barrister walks her through how she came to be at Vernon's, the first sexual encounters there, the many other sexual ordeals he put her through: molesting her and having sex with her; hiding her under his bed while he had sex with other women; making her show herself to other men; continually talking to her about sex when she wanted to be an ordinary girl. It's very, very difficult for Alice but she makes it through. Cross examination is easier, Vernon's wolfish barrister keeps trying to trip her up but Alice is calm and consistent. Alice spots Dr H at the back of the courtroom watching her, nodding encouragement.

When Ma takes the stand it's an altogether different experience, with her descriptions of Vernon's lurid sexual behaviour delivered in a matter-of-fact way in Ma's typically uncompromising language. The court does its best to not look astonished throughout, and fails. Ma sails on. Alice's lawyer can't help but grin, and in cross-examination Ma runs rings around Vernon's barrister.

Vernon's testimony is smooth and professional. He wipes his eyes with his handkerchief at particularly brutal questions, keeping up the façade of a deeply wronged man. But when Alice's fresh-faced barrister stands his cross examination is detailed and forensic, the inconsistencies and contradictions of Vernon's testimony are clear.

The judgement is unequivocally for Alice, the judge calls Vernon's testimony not credible. Alice gets the largest amount of compensation possible. A complete victory.

Alice walks onto the street. Dr H is sitting on a high wall watching her. Alice tries to describe to Dr H the mess of different things she's feeling at that moment. It comes out in a tumble until Alice talks herself out. She looks back up to Dr H.

And now it's finished.

Dr H looks down at her. You're done with this part, at least.

There's more?

There's living, Alice.

Alice thinks, nods. Dr H looks down at her. So can I go now?

Yeah, go on. I want to do the next bit on my own.

Alice walks away down the road, a single figure. Behind her the wall where Dr H sat is empty.